

A Short Essay on Monsters, Birds, and Sounds of the Uncanny

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Abstract: *The crux of this essay is that birdsong—something generally thought of a pleasing and enjoyable—can function, in certain contexts, as an indexical sign of the presence of evil in the world. I narratively contrast notions of the unknown as eerie with the uncanny at home, while simultaneously extending the notion of home to the world through ethnographic examples from fieldwork with Warlpiri people in central Australia. I explore the links between sounds and the uncanny, putting forward that what constitutes the uncanny is culturally specific, and highlight this point through contextualising and contrasting the central Australian case with examples from elsewhere: the Middle Ages, colonial Australia, Horror movies, and so on.*

Keywords: sounds and the uncanny, ethno-ornithology, Aboriginal Australia, horror, bird song

HC SVNT DRAGONES, here be dragons, it says on the Hunt-Lenox Globe just off the east coast of Asia. In the same vein, other medieval cartographers populated the lesser known areas of their charts with all manner of horned, winged, scaled and tailed gruesome beasts from griffons to sea snakes bigger than ships (see also van Duzer 2013). The further away a region from the centre of the cartographer's world the denser they populated it with monsters; the phrase 'here be dragons' becoming code for uncharted territory (Garfield, 2012, and van Duzer, 2012).

When Europeans first explored Australia, they named many a place, as well as fauna and flora, in a manner reminiscent of medieval cartographers, ascribing monstrousness to the unknown: eerie white gum trees became ghost gums, thin-membraned bats became ghost bats, and places were assigned names such as Ghost Reef, Ghost Lake, Ghost Creek, Ghost Gully, Ghost Well, Ghost Spur, Ghost Hill, Ghost Rocks, Ghost Ridge, and Ghost Mountain—and that is just the 'ghosts'; other such names include Dead Pond, Vampire Creek, Bone Cave, Phantom Peak, and Haunted Bay. This small sample intimates well, I think, the disquiet awakened in the newly arrived colonisers by a natural environment utterly alien to them (for analyses of this disquiet see, amongst many others, Curthoys, 1999, O'Reilly and Vernay 2009, and Turcotte 1998). Both, medieval cartographers and white settlers of Australia, understood the uncharted, new, and alien not only as strange (in the literal and metaphoric sense) but as monstrous. In this essay, I want to contrast this emplacing of the spooky at the margins and in the unfamiliar, with its opposite: the monstrousness of home. My first (and most extensive example) is the fear of the uncanny experienced by central Australian Aboriginal people in their very own *Umwelt*.

Aboriginal people settled Australia ca 70,000 years ago and theirs is often described as the world's longest continuously living culture¹. Concretely, this means that white colonisers met tribes who had occupied their respective regions or, in Aboriginal English, *countries*, since time immemorial, and whose relationship to their natural environment was characterised through deep intimacy. Aboriginal people did not understand themselves as owners of their countries, but as arising out of the land and upon their death returning (in)to it, re-joining the pool of generative power of country, out of which future humans, or, equally possible, plants, animals or natural phenomena are to be animated (Munn 1970). Their very being-in-the-world is intertwined with all that surrounds them, exemplified not only in their profound philosophies about being and the world but also in their incomparably intimate knowledge about all that is part of their environment: children are socialised from the youngest possible age onwards into scanning their environs, looking for relatives and at tracks in the sand, listening to different sounds around them, just as they learn to distinguish their environment's many smells; they learn how to follow the little black ants with yellow stripes on their backs on their erratic paths until they lead them to the entry of their nest deep in a mulga grove, they learn how to dig down that first tunnel and follow it to different layers and caverns until they find those where the delicious honey ants are resting. They learn to scan not only their close environs but to also always keep the middle distance and horizon in view, perusing for kangaroos on a hillside and the smoke of a signal fire, noticing an eagle circling high above on the lookout for prey, as well as the direction the breeze is coming from and any changes to it, the clouds towering up on the northern horizon—nothing escapes them. Not only part of their environment, they are also always conscious what is happening in their world, who shares it with them, who is hunting, who is prey, when the summer rains will come, how deep they will have to dig before reaching the water level in a soakage. And if this sounds harmonious and peaceful, then that has more to do with our (Western) imagination of what it would be like to be one with the world than actual embodied and emplaced experience. Especially so when the world we talk about is in central Australia.

Not everything there is friendly, quite the opposite, the deserts of central Australia are perilous—the most delicious berry has a sister plant which looks almost identical but is lethal, there are poisonous spiders, scorpions and centipedes, not to mention snakes, and there are human as well as supernatural beings intending one harm. Some monsters dwell in the remotest of places and are a danger only if you come too close to their territory, other have made their life all about hunting humans to ensorcel, enslave, maim, or kill them. Many of these monsters, as well as some of the malicious sorcerers who pursue their human prey on revenge missions, are masters at making themselves invisible in this world in which people are so much more aware of what is around them than we are, underscoring the need to be vigilant at all times. If you know what to look for the worst just may be avoided. This is why it is important not just to note a whirlwind in the distance but also its path and any random aberrations to it; why it is imperative to look for tracks always, not just those of potential prey—indicating where a goanna has gone into a hiding or a wallaby may have turned—but also foot tracks; if any are spotted that don't belong to any of your companions they are a clear sign that the group may be under threat by a potential and invisible murderer. Lastly, paying attention to bird sounds is an indispensable and essential component of being-in-the-desert²: as monsters are often accompanied by companion birds, paying attention to birds and reading their presence, behaviour, and sounds, as signs of monstrous presence is of vital importance.

This last point, the significance of birds in the detection of monsters, was one of the first lessons I learned, twenty years ago, when I first began to undertake research with Warlpiri people in central Australia. We were out bush, two hours away from the home settlement of Yuendumu, on one of a number of bush camps organised by the Yuendumu School that summer. The idea behind these

one week-long 'country visits' is that for the duration, children are not taught in age groups by mostly non-Indigenous teachers and in class rooms, but out bush, in family groups, by their elders; that children be taught about Dreaming, rituals and songs, about hunting and gathering, about their land and their traditions, on their respective family's countries. On the first day, we visited sacred sites and in the afternoon dug for yams. That evening, by the light of fires, the girls, their torsos painted in shiny red and white ochre designs, followed their mothers and grandmothers dancing their ancestral dances. At the end of a truly amazing day, we swiftly fell asleep on our mattresses and blankets under the starry night sky only to be startled awake shortly after: I, scared because I did not understand why one of the women had started to scream a litany of Warlpiri into the darkness of the night, the others frightened because they understood only too well. The others pulled their blankets over their heads, only Napaljarri sat upright and yelled and yelled and as her yelling ebbed and I was just about to drift off into sleep when I heard a bird twitter and Napaljarri's rant picking up. This became the rhythm of that night: I'd hear a bird sound and Napaljarri would resume her tirade into the darkness. "What's going on?" I asked the girl next to me. "Kurdaitcha" she whispered very quietly through a tiny, temporary opening in the pile of blankets under which she cowered. Kurdaitcha, I learned later, are a specific type of monster, who dwell in the Tanami and whose speciality is to kill Warlpiri people (Musharbash 2014a, 2014b). The bird we heard twitter in the night that was otherwise unnervingly silent (in between Napaljarri's yelling bouts) was a white-winged fairy wren. These wrens are companion birds to Kurdaitcha, and sometimes, as that night out bush, the only way in which Warlpiri people can become aware of the monsters' presence.

What I would like to highlight, for now, is that the song of one bird or another in a certain context, at a certain time, can have not the same, but a similar and potentially stronger effect on Warlpiri people as some musical scores in Horror films have on us. Watching *Jaws*, we know the monster will emerge from the deep any minute when we hear that dadadadadadada; just as the soundtracks of *Psycho*, *The Shining*, and those of the Hammer movies, to name just a few of the most obvious ones, suggest moments of horror creeping up. Not for nothing is it said that (next to musicals) horror movies depend on their musical score more than others.³ And while I leave explanations of why and how that is so to music and film theorists, I would like to add here that next to the obvious attempts at explanation it might also be interesting to pay attention to whether and how certain sounds, tones, melodies and rhythms are tied to the uncanny in culturally specific ways.

In this vein, and returning to Australia, both tourists and some urban dwellers experience terrible fright when they hear possums or dingoes for the first time in their lives (see also Power, 2009, and Instone 1998). The sounds a possum makes are utterly incongruent with animal sounds one is accustomed to, while the howling of dingoes sounds like strands of an unearthly, wailful lament to European ears. As Westerners don't know from where these sounds originate, who is generating them, or why—they get scared. Aboriginal people, on the other hand, know exactly the sounds dingoes and possums produce and as they also know how harmless these creatures are they do not feel afraid. When, however, they hear a particular bird chirp, then they sense exactly the same we sense when we are home alone and hear footsteps creaking on the staircase. In these instances, birdsong is a sign that evil is present and fear is the only possible measure. Like in a horror movie, except for real, here it is not just the sound that triggers fear but the knowledge that the tweet, song, or chirp is an aural confirmation that one is in the presence of evil, that here be monsters.⁴

Having thus far spoken of twittering, singing, and chirping, I need to amend my terminology, as I am concerned with Australian birds. 'Chirping' is not the most appropriate term to describe the 'songs' of Australian birds. Those who live in or have visited Australia, or even seen a documentary

about Australian birds know what I am alluding to. Many Australian birds, including especially many of the flamboyantly gorgeous parrots, lorikeets, cockatoos and galahs which are found all across the continent, sound—especially in comparison to the felicitously named song birds—horrific.⁵ Their squawking is nothing like song but hoarse, and unmelodic; they cark and caw, they screech and scream, piercingly, producing an ear-splitting noise. Whether they sing or bawl, though, is not what determines any association of birds with monsters (for a comparative example, see Feld, 2012:12-21). In this vein, and exemplary for a positive link with one of the most raucous screechers, it is the brolga who announces the coming of the long-anticipated monsoon rains (Nixon and Disbray, 2011). Or take zebra finches, whose ‘song’ by no stretch of the imagination can be called dulcet, they are one of the bird species indicating where in the desert to find water. Neither is the forthrightly spooky-sounding grey-crowned babbler a malevolent omen; to the contrary, the babbler is welcomed as a protector of camps, sounding a warning call when strangers approach (ibid.).⁶ To sharpen the point, take the tu-whit to-whoop of owls and the often-made associations of eeriness;⁷ in central Australia *some* owls are associated with the uncanny, and others are not. Or, take the following Warlpiri myth about the red-breasted crimson chat, *jiniwarnu rdukurduku-tirirtiri-kirli*, documented by Anthony Jampijinpa Egan (1983) in one of the books produced by the Warlpiri literacy centre, which can be summarised as:

A woman lived with her two sons, a long time ago, during the Dreaming. One day they went hunting together. The mother warned her two sons not to walk towards the swamp that was nearby. As the sons were following the tracks of some prey, they heard a bird, who sang so delightfully, they had never heard anything as sweet. Lured by the lovely song, they walked towards the bird. But the bird jumped from one branch to the next and from one tree to another. And the sons followed him. They didn't realise that they were being tricked, and they followed the bird's enchanting sounds all the way into the heart of the swamp. There, the monster which had sent out the bird, grabbed them and pulled them down into the deep. Meantime, the mother was searching for her sons to no avail, and when she saw the blood in the heart of the swamp she knew what had happened. She cried and started wailing and in her pain hit herself on the head with her digging stick, again and again, until she died of grief and then she turned into a beautiful bird. Now she is a red-breasted crimson chat and today, still, you can see the blood of her head wounds on her breast.

Here we find one bird and two morals. On one level, the myth transports Indigenous ornithological knowledge about how to recognise a harmless red-breasted crimson chat by its plumage—remembering the story of the mother and her wounds rendered onto the ornithological body—red head, white throat, black and grey sides and wings, red breast, all red at the front, splattered red towards the back. Not just that, there is also locational knowledge contained in the myth. The ‘proper’ red-breasted crimson chat (the mother) lives in the dry areas abutting swamps. On another level, this myth contains a warning as the bird luring the brothers into the swamp is also a red-breasted crimson chat. At stake here is not the loveliness of the bird's song but the bird's trajectory from its (and the brothers') normal (dry) habitat into the swamp. The moral of the story is about danger flagged by a thing (bird) out of place.⁸

Important then is not only to pay attention to bird calls, be it an owl hooting or a crow cackling, but to know what they imply in context. A red-breasted crimson chat in a dry environment is as harmless as the creaking of a step when you are *not* home alone. A red-breasted crimson chat in a swampy area signifies a threat—something is not the way it should be, this is where danger lurks, where evil is present. The white-winged fairy wren that caused Napaljarri such a fright did so because she heard it at *night* (wrens are day-active birds); and in the same vein night birds heard during the day, or birds heard during the wrong season, or in the wrong habitat, alone when they

are swarm birds, and so on is what gives them potency as signs of monstrous presence. In central Australia, bird voices are *indexical* auditory signs of monstrous presence. As Hanks (2000:124) puts it for natural language utterances, and I extend to (bird) sound, “[t]o say that any linguistic form is ‘indexical’ is to say that it stands for its object neither by resemblance to it, nor by sheer convention, but by contiguity with it”. In the central Australian case, the screeching, warbling or chirping of birds *in the wrong context* makes the presence of evil recognisable, even if not visible.⁹

The existence of monsters, in turn, is part of an explanatory pattern for the otherwise inexplicable. In the old days, when Warlpiri people still lived their traditional hunting and gathering lives, monsters were an answer to questions about unfathomable deaths—that is deaths of anyone but the very young or the very old who are understood to have simply answered the pull of ancestral forces back into the land. All other deaths could only be explained by having the misfortune to have literally crossed the path of a (mark you: invisible!) monster. Those embodiments of evil, the monsters, are as much part of the Warlpiri cosmos as is the morally good, as are families, kangaroos, trees, the wind or the rain (Morton, 2014). Evil does what it has to do, it causes illness and accidents, it murders and rapes. It is futile to try to stop evil from fulfilling its purpose; but one can (should!) try to protect oneself and those close to one by avoiding its presence, or, as Napaljarri did that night when she yelled her litany into the darkness of the night, try and divert evil from its path, try and direct it elsewhere. The safest option, of course, is to avoid evil whenever and wherever possible.

To know what belongs where, what is at the wrong place or in the wrong time and contradicts order, is essential in the continuous quest to evade evil. Such knowledge was not only indispensable during the Dreamtime, and in the many thousands of years of hunting and gathering during which Warlpiri people lived in the Tanami Desert before colonisation. Quite to the contrary, monsters are as present in contemporary neo-colonial central Australia as they were in the past, perhaps more dangerously so as—despite Christianisation, sedentisation, and inclusion into the Australian State—Warlpiri people today seem to be haunted by monsters more frequently than in the past. Today, as Warlpiri people are living in villages, drive across the desert in Toyotas, work in offices, visit schools, churches and clinics more Aboriginal people die than before, more die younger, and more die of preventable diseases (of which non-Indigenous Australians do not die). Politicians, medical practitioners and human rights organisations have many a different explanation and a multitude of strategies, none of which seem to work as the mortality rates of Warlpiri people just seem to rise and rise.¹⁰ For Warlpiri people this means that the presence of monsters has become denser, that today not only does one run the risk of crossing a monster’s path but that monsters are drawn to the settlements like birds to a waterhole, that they (Warlpiri people) have become exposed with sedentisation, that monsters see them as trapped in their settlements and houses; that they have become easy pickings for monsters who now know where to find them. Or, if one wants to reformulate this, that colonisation has monstrous consequences and that these continue unabatedly, indeed, that they are compounding exponentially.

To try and capture one’s *Umwelt* in all its facets therefore is as important today as it was in the past. Warlpiri children are socialised into a continuous scanning for danger from infancy. Warlpiri people are continuously and multi-sensorially engaged in perusing their environment, they look for tracks and other visual signs, feel the wind and the direction it is coming from, smell for fires, and listen to the birds, whose singing, cackling, and cooing gives voice to the condition of the world, including the invisible presence of the monstrous.

As much as the Warlpiri cosmos differs from a Western one, so the voice of evil sounds different to Warlpiri ears compared to our own. The monsters lurking for and threatening Warlpiri people are

not ours. It would however be a mistake to think that only because we have banished our own monsters into books and movies that they do not exist. The world, including ours, is full of monsters; monsters who embody the evil which characterises the 21st century much as earlier centuries (see also Asma 2009).

Whether it be the corollaries of colonisation or of neo-colonialism, of war, drought, or floods, or whether it be an uncontrollable virus, evil lurks everywhere. Perhaps the worst aspect of the monstrous is that it can find us, me, or you, at any time and in any place. And even if we can't see it, approaching in the dark, from behind us, or in the future, so we do recognise its voice, whether it whispers to us softly, or overtakes us with the shrill whistle of a bomb, the deafening bang of an explosion or the ghastly wail of an ambulance, whether it is contained in the silence of a lonely room in an old people's home, whether it is hysterical or quiet like a last breath, whether it rolls towards us with the dark rumble of an earthquake or with the soft lapping of the waves at the beach of Lampedusa washing up the bodies of refugees—we recognise evil's voice, and its sound gives us a taste of the fear and despair we will feel when the incomprehensible becomes reality. At other times, we hear the sound of evil while safely seated at the cinema or in front of the television, and then it lets us shudder cosily as it bestows on us assuasive goose pimples.

Acknowledgements

This essay is a translation into the English of one I wrote for and presented (in German) at Soundcheck im Eulensaal 59 *Monster. Sichtbares. Unsichtbares* organised in collaboration with Universität Kassel. My two-part essay was interspersed and followed by hauntingly beautiful improvisations of the text into music played on the Theremin by Carolina Eyck. It was a colossally fine evening and I cannot thank Markus Böggemann enough for dreaming it up and Stefan Hülsermann for organising it. Thank you to Chris Marcatili for providing much appreciated RA support, and to Paul Manning and the two anonymous reviewers for suggesting stimulating additional literature. None of this would have been possible without the support of the ARC, who, through granting FT130100415, opened space for me to think, write, and experiment.

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Endnotes

1 Including by the Australian government, see <http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/austn-indigenous-cultural-heritage>.



2 And not just being-in-the-desert: there is a rich anthropological tradition of investigating different ontological links between bird sounds and meaning (for just two examples, see Feld 2012 for an example from Papua New Guinea and Walker 2010 on an Amazonian case study). On the investigation of sounding as knowing more generally, see Feld's (2015) treatise of acoustemology.



3 For some scientific insights into the connection between sounds and emotions, see Blumstein, Bryant and Kaye (2012) and Blumstein, Davitian and Kaye (2010). On horror movie scores in particular, see, among many others, Hayward (2008) and Lerner (2009), and on the sounds of the Gothic, see Van Elferen (2012).



4 I refer those interested in sounds of the monstrous, above and beyond sounds of the uncanny, to Dixon's (2011) insightful paper on the 'scream'.



5 For examples, see the specific post about Australian birds that is part of a blog out of the University of Aberdeen called 'Listening to Birds: An Anthropological Approach to Bird Sounds' <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/birdsong/blog/?p=50> as well as <http://soundslikenoise.org/tag/australian-birds/>



6 For more extensive discussion of central Australian human-bird relationships, see Turpin, Gosford and Meakins (2015).



7 Morris (2009:161) elaborates on the link between owls and the uncanny in the following terms: 'It has been said that owls are more often heard than seen, which may explain why some people fear them and others find them eerie and unearthly. Songbirds they are not. Even the traditional *tu-whit tu-who* that tawny owls are supposed to call out is too friendly and too kind to them. To listen to most owls crying in the night air, you might imagine you were standing outside a torture chamber. It is said that they hoot but in reality they are more likely to shriek, scream, screech and squawk... Only the biggest owls produce smoother, softer sounds and even these are reminiscent of someone pretending to be a ghost to frighten a small child.'



8 This point about otherness and inversion has brilliantly been made by Stasch (2009) in the West Papuan context. [↗](#)

9 Central Australian monsters are by no means the only ones whose presence is announced by uncanny sound, for just a couple of comparative examples, see Foster (2015a, 2015b) on Japanese monsters and sound, or Manning (2005) on the knocking noises of Cornish Knackers and American Tommyknockers. [↗](#)

10 For more on death on contemporary Aboriginal Australia see contributions in Glaskin et al. (2008). [↗](#)

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